

*Miroslav Lajčák*

## The Slovak OSCE Chairmanship in 2019: An Appeal for Stronger Multilateralism and More Dialogue

Established almost 45 years ago as an antidote to festering Cold War divisions in Europe, the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) reached across the iron curtain and created what was unthinkable at that time: a platform for dialogue between East and West, with an overarching aim for peace, stability and prosperity on the continent.

In 1995, the Conference became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Since then, the OSCE has evolved to become the largest regional security organization in the world, with mandates spanning political and governance support, election observation missions, field operations, human rights, and issues of social, economic, and environmental development. But one fundamental characteristic has remained until today: the OSCE is still the only dialogue platform where 57 participating States from within and beyond Europe come together with equal voices and equal rights – whether big or small, likeminded or not – to discuss a co-operative approach to security.

When Slovakia took over from Italy to lead the OSCE in 2019, we did so deeply humbled by the great honour and the trust that had been placed in a small nation like ours, but also fully aware of the great responsibility it entailed. We did not enter into this naively thinking we could change the fate of multilateral co-operation, the region, or the Organization in only one year. But despite these natural limitations, we were determined to make a difference where it really matters – for the people on the ground, to open up new spaces for dialogue, to recommit to the basics we may forget at times, and we did so fully aware that the stakes were high. So, in 2019, we guided our work for people, dialogue, and stability in the OSCE region, focusing on three areas.

### *Ongoing Conflicts in Europe – Alarming Trends*

Unsurprisingly, the conflict in and around Ukraine was a top priority for us. The number of casualties we have witnessed in eastern Ukraine in the past five years is higher than anything we have seen elsewhere in Europe this century. However, the real tragedy becomes clear only when you look at the hundreds of thousands of people severely impacted by the conflict, living along the contact line in dire humanitarian situations. Their daily struggle does not make headlines on the front pages of our newspapers, but it is very real.

Back in January, things looked bleak. We had just seen a spike in tensions, and the path forward seemed uncertain.

This is why we decided to put our primary focus on people, aiming to find very concrete ways to ease their suffering. Early in the year, we proposed nine simple and tangible confidence-building measures (CBMs) on issues such as improving the situation with regard to checkpoints, facilitating the exchange of detainees, boosting humanitarian demining, and, importantly, repairing the damaged bridge in Stanytsia Luhanska. The bridge became my personal mission in 2019, simply because, during my first trip to Ukraine as Chairperson in January, I was shocked by what I saw: the suffering these people – most of them elderly – had to go through in crossing the bridge. Because of the damage done to the bridge by the conflict, simple tasks like collecting pensions or seeking healthcare put people's lives in danger. This November, however, after intense negotiation, the damaged bridge was repaired, and they can now cross in safety and with dignity – an important symbol of progress and hope.

We have also seen progress through our other humanitarian CBMs. After four trips to Ukraine as OSCE Chairperson, I can attest to the great work being done on the ground by the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) to continue to alleviate the suffering of people. In fact, the more than 1,300 SMM monitors, under the new leadership of Ambassador Yaşar Halit Çevik, are the eyes and ears of the international community on the ground.

In 2019, we also witnessed what none of us predicted: the power of political will with the landslide victory of President Volodymyr Zelensky and his firm determination to end the war in the east. Since then we have seen unprecedented political progress, culminating in the first Normandy Four Summit in Paris in three years, with concrete outcomes such as ceasing fire, additional disengagement, and a second exchange of detainees, which will be followed by another meeting in four months' time. All of these represent real steps towards implementing our best and only chance at a political solution: the Minsk Agreements. And we need to keep this extremely important momentum alive.

Unfortunately, Ukraine is not the only home to hostilities in Europe. People elsewhere continue to suffer the adverse impact of unresolved conflicts. When it comes to Nagorno-Karabakh, there remains a real risk of escalation. In Georgia, people are living with the reality of frequent denials of fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of movement. And, in the Transdniestrian settlement process, it is positive that we managed to adopt a Ministerial Statement on the negotiations in the "5+2" format at the Ministerial Council in Bratislava, but without concrete commitments on the way forward, the progress made in recent years is at risk of backsliding. In all these cases, the OSCE's efforts to de-escalate tensions and open channels for new dialogue remain invaluable, and it is clear that the Organization will be the first to offer its support for concrete steps towards peace.

We cannot, however, focus only on the conflicts of today. We must also respond to another trend.

### *The Uncertainty Surrounding Future Threats to Peace and Security*

Slovakia chose the theme “A Safer Future” as a second priority for its Chairmanship. All over the world, challenges to peace and security have changed rapidly in recent years and are not as easy to detect as they used to be. More conflicts are now fought within, rather than across, borders. Regular armed forces are, in many cases, outnumbered by non-state actors. Cyber-attacks or the decision to go down the path of violent extremism do not come with sirens or flashing lights. And, from climate change to anti-Semitism, hate, and intolerance, the drivers of conflict are more expansive and complex than ever.

To achieve security in Europe, we not only have to react to these realities; we must also scan the horizon for new ones. All new and emerging challenges must be on the table – from energy, natural resources, and climate change to cyber threats. We must also seriously exploit opportunities in other areas, such as the full inclusion of women and young people throughout our work, and support longer-term prevention, like Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R). Engaging with OSCE tools like the Structured Dialogue, or indeed ensuring these tools can evolve, for example by modernizing the Vienna Document, are also key areas where positive changes can be made.

I am glad that we managed to adopt two commemorative declarations at this year’s Ministerial Council in Bratislava, on the 25th anniversary of the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security and of the Principles Governing Non-Proliferation respectively. However, commemorative texts are not enough to move our Organization forward.

A serious concern in planning for a safer future is that, although our work around democratic institutions and human rights remains a cornerstone of our understanding of comprehensive security, it is becoming more and more difficult to hold the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) of the OSCE, Europe’s largest annual human rights and democracy conference. Spending weeks discussing modalities does not advance security, human rights, or prosperity in the region and it does not help people on the ground. I made this point very clearly to ministers in Bratislava this December, and I hope we see some flexibility and progress in the years ahead.

### *The Dangers Facing Our Multilateral Order*

Finally, the third trend we addressed – and aimed to counter – in 2019 relates to the dangers facing our multilateral order. These days, multilateralism has become a buzzword, but the meaning behind it goes back centuries. It is the idea that we can gain more working together than alone; that co-operation and dialogue can prevent conflict and create opportunity; that as diverse as the 57 participating States of the OSCE region are, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, joint solutions to our common challenges are more likely to stick.

The OSCE is multilateralism in action, but it is not a lone wolf. In fact, it is operating in quite a crowded landscape. In 2019, Slovakia worked to support complementary partnerships across this landscape – from regional organizations, like the European Union, to the global framework of the United Nations. This is why I am glad that we finalized a joint statement with the UN Secretary-General to supplement the framework for co-operation and co-ordination between our two organizations.

Lately, we have heard more and more voices speaking up in support of multilateralism. We also heard the same from the more than 50 decision-makers participating in this year's Ministerial Council in Bratislava. And we have seen it through two countries, Sweden and Poland, showing their commitment to picking up the slack and deciding to lead the Organization in 2021 and 2022 respectively. With Albania as the Chair for 2020, this provides us with continuity and the chance for more long-term planning. And I thank all three countries for taking on the challenge.

However, while speaking up for multilateralism is very positive, and we should continue to do so, our words alone will not change anything. This is why I issued my Bratislava Appeal<sup>1</sup> ahead of the Bratislava Ministerial Council, urging my colleagues to recommit to what we all believe in – co-operation, dialogue, our principles and commitments, and joint solutions – and show our belief in the very fundamentals of the OSCE through the way we conduct our day-to-day affairs.

Multilateralism requires commitment and compromise, or consensus in the case of the OSCE.

And although more than 40 ministers joined me in my call, the outcome of our negotiations painted a different picture. The bleak reality of 2019 is that we are unable to find consensus; to adapt to the changing security environment around us; and we are not well equipped to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

If we cannot even agree on the basics, from our annual budget to agendas for our events, what chance do we have of realizing the full vision of the Helsinki Final Act?

For peace and stability in Europe, a recommitment to multilateralism is crucial.

Throughout the year, whether in our series of Chair's Dialogues with Vienna-based Permanent Representatives, or through our Informal Ministerial Gathering in the Slovak High Tatras mountains, I have heard that the OSCE's 57 participating States believe in our regional multilateral system, in the principles the Organization stands for, in solution-based and interactive dialogue, and in our shared responsibility to the people on the ground.

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1 OSCE, OSCE Chair Lajčák kicks off 26th Ministerial Council with his "Bratislava Appeal"; calls for increased flexibility and willingness to compromise, Bratislava, 5 December 2019, at: <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/441173>.

And I myself witnessed the OSCE's irreplaceable role and vast potential in bringing the dream of lasting peace in Europe to life when I visited 15 OSCE field operations.

But I have not seen any manifestations of this spirit in the negotiations during this year's Ministerial Council, which continued after the ministers left Bratislava. And here, once again, I would repeat my appeal to all participating States to show their recommitment through actions and not just words.

Now it is time to hand over the reins to Albania for 2020. And all that is left is my sincere hope that, in 2019, Slovakia made a small but important contribution to strengthening our regional multilateral system and that the benefits will be felt, not just in Vienna, but by people on the ground.